

SOLROUTES

The presence of sub-Saharan migrants in Sfax

*State repression, local dynamic and strategies to cope
with the tension.*

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Introduction:

After a long period of invisibility, the presence of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia—dating back more than two decades and significantly reinforced by the establishment of the African Development Bank (Boubakri & Mazella, 2005)—has now become a visible “social reality”. This phenomenon, particularly pronounced after the fall of the Ben Ali and Gaddafi regimes in 2011, has led many migrants to choose Tunisia as a temporary or permanent residence before attempting to reach Europe (Cassarini, 2020). This evolving situation has introduced complex political, social, security, and humanitarian challenges (Ben Khalifa, 2023).

Despite the lack of reliable statistics on the exact number of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia (Saidi, 2023), the public debate surrounding their presence has grown increasingly prominent, both domestically and internationally. A pivotal moment in this discourse occurred following the President's speech on February 21, 2023, which sparked a wave of violence and racist reactions against sub-Saharan migrants and Black individuals in general, placing them in significant danger.¹

Although racism in Tunisia is not a new phenomenon, the perception of Black people, historically linked to the legacy of slavery (Scaglioni, 2020), has not significantly evolved or improved. Today, many remain among the most marginalized and disadvantaged social strata (Mrad, 2005). However, the recent shift in the state's stance has, to some extent, legitimized these attitudes, making the current situation particularly concerning. This shift compels Tunisians to confront uncomfortable questions about their acceptance of others, their levels of tolerance, and the extent to which racist tendencies persist. It also underscores the broader challenges of migration in the Mediterranean and Tunisia's role within this dynamic.

while Certain nationalist parties² and political figures in Tunisia perceive the presence of sub-Saharan Africans as part of a broader settlement plan orchestrated by various organizations and associations, allegedly with the backing of the European Union. These perspectives, which draw parallels to the Palestinian issue and colonial legacies, are particularly prevalent among nationalist

¹ Amnesty international, Mars 10,2023 the president 's racist speech incites a wave of violence against black africans:<https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/news/2023/03/tunisia-presidents-racist-speech-incites-a-wave-of-violence-against-black-africans/>

²The Tunisian Nationalist Party was founded in 2018 and is highly active online. Its political stance is largely centered on preserving Tunisian identity and opposing foreigners, particularly those from sub-Saharan Africa. In addition, the party leads campaigns against activists and civil society organizations under the pretext of fighting corruption. It specifically targets associations that receive foreign funding, accusing them of conspiring against Tunisia, attempting to alter the country's demographic composition, and spreading chaos. According to numerous statements published on their official Facebook page, the party considers these activities a threat to national security. <https://www.facebook.com/search/top/?q=%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%AD%D8%B2%D8%A8%20%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%82%D9%88%D9%85%D9%8A>

parties and certain parliamentary figures aligned with the President. Such views have fueled fears of potential threats to national sovereignty and demographic shifts in Tunisia.

Conversely, activists within civil society argue that Tunisia has become a pawn of the European Union, with its migration policies heavily influenced by President Kais Saied. In this context, the externalization of borders has played a pivotal role in Saied's political maneuvering. Under mounting pressure from opposition parties, he has sought to align with the EU, leveraging migration as a bargaining chip to secure financial aid and political legitimacy. In exchange for this cooperation, the EU has largely overlooked Tunisia's internal political developments, including its increasing authoritarianism and human rights violations (Ben Jaballah 2023).

Given these divergent viewpoints, this report examines the on-ground realities and perceptions of the sub-Saharan African presence in Sfax, a city where their numbers are particularly significant. Specifically, it investigates the internal dynamics of local communities in Jbeniana and Sfax, seeking to understand how the local population perceives and interacts with these migrants. Building on this, the report delves into the social, economic, and cultural factors that shape these perceptions. By examining interactions between local residents and sub-Saharan migrants, the study aims to uncover underlying tensions, instances of solidarity, and the social mechanisms that either support or marginalize migrant communities.

The report also explores the coping mechanisms employed by migrants, with a particular focus on women, who face distinct vulnerabilities throughout the migration process. Gender not only influences migration dynamics but also shapes post-migration experiences, particularly in terms of labor and social integration. Women are disproportionately exposed to risks such as sexual exploitation and trafficking, with studies indicating that up to 90% of female migrants along the Mediterranean route experience sexual violence before reaching Italy (Biswas et al. 2023).

Furthermore, the report examines the role of civil society and key social actors in shaping or challenging dominant perceptions and narratives surrounding migration. As part of this effort, civil society actors participated in a dedicated podcast aimed at critically engaging with political discourse, challenging dominant narratives about migrants, and fostering public debate.

By addressing these issues, this analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the intersection between social perceptions, media and political narrative, and the role of civil society in shaping Tunisia's migration policies and integration dynamics.

Therefore, the report is structured as follows:

- **Methodology:** This section describes the ethnographic approach employed during fieldwork, highlighting the challenges of navigating sensitive topics within an increasingly restrictive political climate.

- **Structural Racism and Historical Context:** It explores the historical roots of anti-Black racism in Tunisia and examines how these legacies shape contemporary attitudes and policies.
- **Local dynamics: The Impact of State repression on Migrant Experiences and Community Tensions:** This section analyzes local communities' perspective toward sub-Saharan migrants, focusing on the interplay between acts of solidarity and growing hostility. It examines the impact of the state's repression, the economic hardship, and the media narratives' role in shaping the evolving dynamics of solidarity and hostility.
- **Gendered Dimensions:** A dedicated section highlights the specific challenges faced by migrant women, emphasizing their resilience and survival strategies in the face of exploitation and violence.
- **Podcast Initiative:** This section discusses the podcast initiative, designed as a platform to foster public dialogue on migration, racism, and solidarity. It underscores the importance of public sociology in bridging the gap between academic research and real-world impact, engaging broader audiences in critical discussions on migration, human rights, and social justice.

The initiative also highlights the evolving role of researchers, advocating for active engagement with societal issues rather than remaining confined to a narrow academic sphere. By stepping beyond traditional academic boundaries, researchers can contribute to societal change, challenge dominant narratives, and influence public opinion.

Methodology:

Between January and February 2024, as well as from May to July 2024, I conducted ethnographic research as part of the SOLROUTE project. While my initial focus was not on sub-Saharan migration, it quickly became evident that no researcher could visit Sfax without addressing the evolving dynamics of migration flows and the significant presence of sub-Saharan migrants in a region with a relatively small local population. My research placed particular emphasis on Jbeniana, within the governorate of Sfax.

Sfax was chosen due to its high concentration of migrants. As one of Tunisia's most densely populated cities and a key economic hub, Sfax is renowned for its industries and commerce. Its strategic location in southern Tunisia, close to border areas and major transit points—including the Kerkennah Islands, Louza, and the port of Sidi Mansour—has made it a critical site for irregular migration. In recent years, Sfax has become Sfax linchpin departure point for migrants attempting to reach Europe³. This growing influx has fueled local anxieties over demographic shifts, a concern explicitly referenced in President Kais Saied's speech in February 2023.

³ Hamza Meddeb , Fakhreddine Louati 2024 , tunisia 's transformation into transit hub :illegal migration and policy dilemmas , <https://carnegieendowment.org/research/2024/03/tunisias-transformation-into-a-transit-hub-illegal-migration-and-policy-dilemmas?lang=en¢er=middle-east>.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic and the challenges of accessing the field, I sought permission from the University of Sfax to conduct my research. However, due to bureaucratic obstacles, permission was not granted. The political climate, marked by an increasing wave of arrests targeting opponents, particularly those involved in migration issues, further complicated my efforts. For instance, in May 2024, Saadia Mosbah, an anti-racism activist, was detained, along with Sonia Dahmani, a lawyer arrested after making a sarcastic remark criticizing the country's political situation.

Additionally, my family's concerns each time I planned a visit to Sfax, along with their repeated attempts to dissuade me from pursuing this topic, prompted me to take extra precautions. Given the urgency of completing my research within a limited time frame, the most practical solution was to adopt a low-profile approach.

During my initial visits to Jbeniana and my attempts to engage with migrants, it became evident that my presence as a Tunisian woman speaking with a Black migrant drew unwanted attention. I was met with disapproving looks and remarks such as, "*Couldn't you find a man to sit with?*"—comments that made even the migrants I was speaking with uncomfortable. Some preferred that we continue our conversations over the phone instead.

It quickly became clear that, as a Tunisian woman, conducting direct fieldwork with migrants posed significant challenges. Consequently, I redirected my focus toward the local population, aiming to understand their perceptions of the presence of Sub-Saharan Africans. However, engaging directly with the local community was not easy either. In addition to the social sensitivities involved, there was a risk that the responses I received would not reflect genuine perceptions, as individuals often sought to justify their views and attitudes when questioned directly.

Given these concerns, I opted for covert research and decided to limit my interactions to the local community, using public and private transportation and observing people's interactions from a distance in public spaces. Direct conversations were reserved for occasional, everyday interactions with vendors in restaurants or shops. and did not explicitly present myself as a researcher. However, when asked, I identified myself as a university student without providing further details.

I frequently used public transport (louage)⁴ to travel between Jbeniana and Sfax. During these journeys, I would often initiate conversations with fellow passengers. These informal exchanges in shared transportation settings provided valuable insights into broader societal attitudes. Discussions on topics such as the state of the city, economic pressures, and migration frequently emerged. This approach allowed me to gather unfiltered insights into how both sub-Saharan migrants and Tunisians are perceived and discussed at a grassroots level.

While covert research is often criticized for violating participants' rights and is considered ethically problematic by ethics committees and scholars—particularly in sociology and anthropology—this approach was necessitated by the specific research context. Conducting research in public transport settings made full disclosure impractical, if not impossible. As scholars have noted, the

⁴ The "louage" is a shared taxi in Tunisia and is a popular means of transport.

feasibility of an overt approach is often shaped by the research environment itself (Lugosi, 2006; Spicker, 2011). Additionally, time constraints limited opportunities to build rapport or establish a conducive research setting, further justifying the choice of covert research. Scholars argue that covert research can be ethically acceptable under certain circumstances, particularly when conducted for a limited duration and serves as the only viable means of accessing the field (Marzano, 2022).

The debate on ethical oversight in international research highlights a fundamental tension between ensuring ethical rigor and adapting to the realities of fieldwork in restrictive environments (Andrea S. Nichols, 2016). For instance, U.S. federal regulations mandate IRB (Institutional Review Board) approval, while CIOMS (Council for International Organizations of Medical Sciences) guidelines recommend ethical review in both the researcher's home country and the host country. Some scholars argue that dual approval enhances accountability, while others view strict adherence to external ethical standards as a form of ethical imperialism that disregards local contexts (CIOMS, 2002). This debate is particularly relevant to my research on sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, where political sensitivities, legal restrictions, and social stigmatization pose significant challenges to overt research.

In this sensitive political context, openly disclosing the goals and purpose of the research would have been not only difficult but potentially counterproductive. My positionality also influenced my methodological choices. While transparency is generally considered the ethical ideal, revealing my role as a researcher in this context would likely have led participants to consciously or unconsciously alter their responses. This effect, often described as reactivity, could have hindered an authentic understanding of people's perceptions of sub-Saharan migrants. By adopting a covert approach, I was able to capture candid, unfiltered opinions, providing a more accurate reflection of public discourse on migration. Rather than being an ethical shortcoming, covert research was a necessary strategy to ensure the integrity and validity of my findings. However, covert research does not imply evading ethical responsibility but rather means that the researcher adapts to fieldwork conditions and practices continuous self-regulation, carefully navigating moral boundaries as situations arise (Calvey, 2018). In this study, I made a concerted effort to protect participants' anonymity, ensuring their identities were not disclosed, nor was any information shared that could reveal them.

To facilitate the research, I engaged in spontaneous conversations. I often observed migrants passing by, typically in groups, and casually asked those around me, *"There are many migrants here; how do they live?"* This question often sparked a conversation that typically lasted for the entire hour-long journey between Jbeniana and Sfax.

Conversing with taxi drivers, whom I relied on for transportation in Sfax, was another frequent method of engagement. These conversations often began with everyday topics such as the weather, summer vacations, or potential trips to Mahdia, a popular summer destination for the people of Sfax. I would sometimes ask whether they planned to avoid Mahdia due to fears surrounding the presence of Africans, as had been reported the previous year. While most taxi drivers were eager to discuss the topic, these conversations often lacked a coherent thread. Stories and topics would frequently overlap, with discussions not always directly related to sub-

Saharan migrants. The shorter travel times, usually around 10 minutes depending on traffic conditions, limited the depth of the discussions. Nevertheless, taxi drivers were often knowledgeable about the issues and had firsthand insights, especially prior to the peak of the migrant crisis, when taxi drivers themselves were targeted for transporting migrants. While no formal judicial or legal decision prohibited them from transporting migrants, drivers were subject to security orders, and authorities would inspect their phones to determine if they had coordinated transport for migrants. If caught, they risked facing legal consequences.

Social media platforms, especially Facebook, have also become essential tools for analyzing narratives surrounding sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia. Beyond merely facilitating the exchange of information, social media has become an integral part of contemporary society, shaping social dynamics and behaviors in significant ways (Rachbini 2023). It amplifies social influence, shaping opinions through repeated interactions. Extreme views, including racial prejudices, often intensify within groups. Both social and mass media play a crucial role in shaping public opinion (Moussaïd et al , 2013), significantly impacting perceptions of migration in Tunisia .

By examining online interactions, I sought to understand not only how Tunisians perceive and discuss migration but also how migrants themselves share their experiences. However, I remained aware of the inherent biases in these platforms, where engagement often amplifies the most polarizing and emotionally charged content. For example, news about migrant-related incidents tends to attract disproportionate attention from those with strong opinions, particularly xenophobic or racist views. Despite this, social media provided valuable insights into the realities faced by migrants, especially women, who, in a climate of economic hardship and increasing restrictions on migration, sometimes resort to offering sexual services as a means of survival. By cross-referencing these digital observations with fieldwork and interviews, I sought to navigate these biases and build a more nuanced understanding of the situation.

Structural racism, historically and politically entrenched:

Although Tunisia enacted a series of decrees against slavery starting in 1841, which continued until its official abolition on January 23, 1846, prior to Great Britain's abolition in 1833 and France's in 1848 (Reguiga, 2011), the reality was more complex. This legal reform, while monumental, did not necessarily lead to a widespread cultural transformation. According to A. Larguèche, (in reguiga2011) slavery in Tunisia was a "social practice without significant economic dimensions." Even after independence, despite Habib Bourguiba being widely portrayed as the founder of a modern and open Tunisia, structural racism persisted. Maha Abdelhamid (2019), in her analysis of racism in Tunisia, argues that state-sponsored discrimination can be traced back to Bourguiba's era. While his official discourse emphasized the creation of a unified Tunisian nation where all citizens were equal, his policies often reinforced a national identity that marginalized minority groups—particularly black Jewish, Amazigh(reguiga2022) These communities were either folklorized, silenced, or relegated to a secondary status(Pouessel 2012). In this context, as many

researchers have proven, black Tunisians have always been part of institutionalized racism and structural exclusion, rooted in government policies. (Scaglioni2020).

A striking example is the case of Slim Merzoug, a Black Tunisian man who, in the early 1960s, became the first to openly oppose racism. In response to his activism, Bourguiba had him imprisoned in a psychiatric hospital for over 35 years (Maha Abdelhamid 2019), illustrating how dissent against racial discrimination was brutally repressed.

Although ,The post-revolutionary period in Tunisia marks a significant turning point for Black Tunisians, who have long been marginalized. Since 2011, initiatives and pressure from activists, coupled with the strategic use of social media, as noted by Ines Mrad Dali (2015), have provided crucial platforms for building communities, raising awareness, and mobilizing support for their cause. These efforts culminated in the adoption of the 2018 anti-discrimination law, which prohibits all forms of racial discrimination in Tunisia.

However, in the politically charged post-revolutionary atmosphere, compounded by an ongoing economic crisis, urgent priorities such as unemployment and job creation have overshadowed minority rights, pushing them into the background despite their importance (Maha Abdelhamid & Gilles Jacob Lellouche, in Stephanie Poussel, 2012).

Therefore, the reactions of Tunisians toward sub-Saharan Africans cannot be separated from this deeply ingrained structural racism, which remains embedded in the national consciousness and continues to manifest itself, even in the everyday language used by Tunisians. People I met commonly refer to individuals with dark skin as "*wousfan*" (plural) or "*wasif*" (singular), a term derived from the Arabic word *waṣīf*, meaning "servant" or "domestic worker" (Samia Ben Amor, 2021). Despite the derogatory connotation of this term, some, even within academic circles, claim that it is merely a descriptor of skin color, denying its racist undertones. As mentioned by a civil society actor I met in Jbeniana, he argued:

*"Wasif is only used to describe color, just as we say 'abyath' for white people, we say 'wasif' for a Black person, and it has nothing to do with racism."*⁵

This perspective aligns with Vincent Geisser's (2023) argument that the normalization of racism is prevalent even among people of high social status in Tunisia. Another label commonly applied to migrants from sub-Saharan Africa is "*Afarica*." While this term may seem neutral, as it refers to the migrants' geographical origin, it also reflects the racial segregation entrenched within Tunisian society. Tunisians often differentiate themselves from other Africans, associating Africa with poverty and underdevelopment. For instance, Z., a woman in her 50s whom I met on June 7, 2024,

⁵ In February 2024, an interview was conducted with a civil society actor who wished to remain anonymous, in a public space in Jbeniana, to discuss the presence of sub-Saharan migrants

during a *louage* ride, described 'wousfans' as dirty, barbaric, uncivilized, and superstitious, with many children and lacking principles. However, she acknowledged that many of them work hard for lower wages and take on jobs that Tunisians are no longer willing to do. She noted, "*Everyone hires them here.*" When I asked if this was due to cheap labor, she explained that it was because they were both inexpensive and hardworking in roles that Tunisians refused to take on.

As Ines Mrad Dali pointed out in 2005, the racial stereotypes faced by sub-Saharan Africans today reflect Tunisia's overlooked history of Black people in society, where they have often been perceived in a subordinate or servile position inherited from their past status as slave. This history frequently surfaces in conversations and daily interactions, perpetuating a legacy of subjugation and reinforcing a social hierarchy where sub-Saharan Africans are perceived as inferior, justifying their exploitation both historically and in the present day, as noted by Sophie Bessis (cited in Geisser, 2023).

However, I believe that race alone is insufficient to fully explain this issue. class dynamic also play a crucial role in understanding this matter during my conversation with Z⁶ it become evident that she recognized discrimination even among tunisian themselves. This included discrimination between people from Sfax and those from Jbeniana, despite being from the same governorate. She observed that the people of Sfax, who are from an urban area, still regard those from rural areas like Jbeniana as "*Jboura*" or "*Areeba*"⁷ (meaning uncivilized, backward, and underdeveloped).

Z. further expressed her confusion about the concentration of Africans in the city of Jbeniana, noting that the people of Sfax had expelled them. She suggested that these migrants could either be relocated to more prosperous regions of Tunisia or deported altogether, instead of leaving the people of Jbeniana to shoulder the burden of this issue alone. In a discussion with A.⁸, a woman in her 30s who is both a teacher and a civil society actor, she emphasized that racism exists even among Tunisians themselves, often based on regional, economic, and social differences. According to her, this phenomenon is not unique to Tunisia but is also present in Europe. This perspective, as highlighted by Stéphanie Poussel (2023), underscores the complex interplay between race, class, and regionalism in Tunisia, which contributes to the marginalization of Black Tunisians. The discrimination they face is not merely about skin color but is deeply intertwined with socio-economic and regional biases. Coastal areas that have benefited more from

⁶Z., a woman in her fifties, was encountered during a *louage* journey from Jbeniana to Sfax.

⁷ The word Areebi is derived from the word Arabi (Arab). While colonial powers often portrayed Arabs as savage and barbaric, this perception was internalized by the very culture that was targeted. Consequently, in the popular imagination, people of Arab descent have, in some cases, absorbed and reproduced these colonial stereotypes within their own social contexts

⁸ An interview with A. was conducted during a meeting at the University of Sfax and continued in a *louage* (shared taxi) on our journey back from Sfax to Mahdia

industrialization and development are perceived as more "modern" and superior, creating a hierarchy that devalues those from the interior and south region, who are often viewed as less developed or backward. This regional bias reinforces class distinctions, where being from a less industrialized area is equated with a lower socio-economic status. For Black Tunisians, these regional and class prejudices intersect with racial discrimination, further compounding their marginalization. The existence of this marginalized group challenges the notion of a unified, homogeneous national identity that has long been promoted in Tunisia. It exposes the layers of inequality and stratification within society, which are often hidden beneath the surface of national unity. The history and experiences of Black Tunisians serve as a reminder that the nation's social fabric is far more complex and divided than the official narrative suggests. Recognizing this complexity is crucial for addressing the systemic issues that perpetuate discrimination and marginalization in Tunisia.

Despite the efforts made after the revolution, including the activism of many advocates who have brought attention to the rights of minorities in Tunisia—such as the Amazigh, Jews, and Black people (Pouessel, 2012)—and the adoption of the 2018 law that criminalizes all forms of discrimination, these legal measures often remain symbolic due to the bureaucratic challenges Tunisia faces. Many laws serve merely as a facade, acting as an alibi for those in power, and remain as ink on paper without benefiting the people they are intended to protect.

The presence of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia has evolved over time. Until the late 1990s, Tunisia, unlike other Maghreb countries, saw little attention regarding the transit of sub-Saharan migrants to Europe. A shift occurred in 2011 with the Libyan revolution, as waves of sub-Saharan refugees fleeing the conflict were gathered in camps near the Tunisian-Libyan border (Pouessel 2023). Lack of legal status prevents them from reporting assaults or discrimination, as they are often unable to seek help from the police due to insufficient documentation. As a result, the new anti-racism law is ineffective for them, highlighting the gap between legal reforms and their practical enforcement, and leaving them vulnerable to exploitation. In conclusion, despite Tunisia's legal advancements, such as the abolition of slavery and the anti-discrimination law, structural racism remains entrenched in both everyday interactions and institutional practices. The post-revolutionary period presents an opportunity for reflection and change, but the deep-rooted legacy of racial inequality continues to challenge these efforts.

'It Is a Lot': Social Frictions and the Paradox of State Repression

In September 2023, the Tunisian authorities carried out a security campaign targeting sub-Saharan Africans and transferred them to the town of Al-Amra — a move that the Minister of the

Interior at the time portrayed as part of a strategic plan⁹ to avoid confrontation between the migrants and the city's residents, as crime is more prevalent in the city, while distributing them across rural areas would reduce the burden and potential conflicts. He suggested that there was a pre-existing plan to settle them, based on previous agreements, and accused those who came before him of turning Tunisia into a country for settling migrants—an idea he found unacceptable. He argued that it was preferable for the migrants to be in the olive fields rather than in the city, but failed to provide any strategic plan for managing the migrants or any sustainable solutions. This lack of planning contributed to an escalation in violence between the migrants and the local community, who later felt abandoned and left to face the consequences of the migrant influx alone

While we have previously highlighted the presence of deeply rooted structural racism within the collective consciousness—often unconsciously practiced by Tunisians towards black individuals in general and sub-Saharan people in particular—most Tunisians, and particularly the residents of Jbeniana I interviewed, do not perceive themselves as racist. They do not attribute their complaints against sub-Saharan migrants to racism. Instead, their discourse frequently revolves around the economic crisis they are experiencing, pointing to the scarcity or unavailability of essential goods and the monopolization of these goods by certain merchants. Additionally, they express that the presence of a significant number of sub-Saharan Africans has made coexistence increasingly difficult.

In an interview with A. (previously mentioned), as well as with others I encountered during my travels, many highlighted the economic crisis currently affecting the country and the shortage of essential goods. A. noted that during her frequent trips to Sfax for work, she often hears locals, particularly from Jbeniana, complaining about the scarcity of basic products in the market. According to them, this shortage is partly attributed to the presence of sub-Saharan Africans. When I pointed out to A. that this crisis affects almost all regions of Tunisia, even those without sub-Saharan migrants, she explained that the situation is worse in Jbeniana because vendors exploit the Africans by selling goods to them at inflated prices. As a result, when goods are available, vendors prefer to hide them and sell them to migrants at exorbitant rates instead of to Tunisians.

Most interviewees confirmed that, initially, many people were willing to help the migrants. However, as their numbers grew significantly, the situation, in their view, became overwhelming. They expressed concerns about their inability to meet the increasing demands for assistance, with some even claiming that migrants now outnumber the local population. This, they argue, makes it impossible for ordinary citizens—who are already struggling in their daily lives—to provide

⁹In a statement to the parliament in mars 2024, the Minister of the Interior said: 'We relocated the Africans from the cities of Sfax to rural areas as a strategic plan to avoid the conflict
<https://www.facebook.com/mosaiquefm/videos/1098141998278602>

support without state intervention. Many voiced frustration with the government, criticizing both the lack of job opportunities and the state's failure to effectively manage the situation.

Despite this atmosphere, several individuals, including taxi drivers and ordinary citizens, acknowledge that "*the presence of migrants benefits everyone.*" They recognize the economic contributions of sub-Saharan migrants while also highlighting the exploitation they face. Migrants often serve as cheap labor, pay higher prices for goods compared to locals, and are subjected to inflated rents—particularly in Sfax, where access to adequate housing remains a challenge. Additionally, taxi drivers tend to demand significantly higher fares from them.

Several of those interviewed also recognize that just as Tunisians migrate to Italy for a better life, sub-Saharan Africans come to Tunisia for the same reason. However, they remain unwilling to accept that Tunisia should become a destination country for immigration. Their reasoning is that Tunisia itself is struggling economically and is not equipped to accommodate more migrants. Moreover, they argue that Tunisia is not as wealthy as Europe and that Africa's current situation results from European policies. Therefore, they believe it is Europe that should bear the responsibility, not Tunisia.

In parallel, official state discourse, represented by President Kais Saied, and his political allies emphasizes the identity dimension and the perceived threat posed by these migrants to the Tunisian state. In his widely known speech in February 2023, in which he claimed that "*hordes of irregular migrants from sub-Saharan Africa have flowed into Tunisia,*" with the potential for violence, crime, and unacceptable practices that such a situation could entail. He referred to this as "*an abnormal situation*" and suggested it was part of a "*criminal scheme*" aimed at altering Tunisia's demographic composition, attempting to transform the country into "*a purely African state with no affiliation to the Arab and Islamic worlds.*"¹⁰ The speech stirred controversy among many observers who considered it racist and inflammatory. In response to the international and national backlash, President Kais Saied slightly adjusted his tone, claiming that his words were misinterpreted and that he did not intend to be racist. In an effort to address the rising hostility towards sub-Saharan migrants, Tunisia announced measures to support them, including issuing one-year residency cards for African students and extending residency permits, while rejecting accusations of racism¹¹.

However, He continues to promote the conspiracy theory and asserts that national sovereignty and identity are under threat, rejecting the idea of Tunisia being a reservoir for migrants. This stance often contradicts the reality on the ground and appears to be a facade designed to sway

¹⁰ Presidency of the Tunisian Republic, Press Release of the National Security Council of February 21, 2023, Carthage Palace, February 21, 2023. <https://www.facebook.com/Presidence.tn>.

¹¹ Africans in Tunisia: After being accused of racism, Tunisia announces urgent measures to solve the migrant crisis Mars 6, 2023 <https://www.bbc.com/arabic/middleeast-64858452>

public opinion, as data and statistics suggest otherwise.¹² Most recently, during his visit to Jbeniana on July 13, 2024, to address the situation, President Kais Saied reiterated his belief that conspirators are behind the presence of these migrants, whose entry into the country remains a mystery. When a citizen intervened to complain about the state's absence, the president angrily rebuked him, stating :you should not say that the state is not present ¹³

This viewpoint is widely adopted by his supporters and a large segment of society, who now portray migrants from sub-Saharan Africa as hordes seeking to settle in the country. A journalist I met on June 3, 2024, in his office argued that Tunisians' anger is being amplified on social media by certain groups with specific agendas, who are deliberately promoting anti-migrant campaigns. He mentioned that some people are even manipulating videos by inserting images or presenting violent acts by black individuals as if they occurred in Tunisia, something he personally observed during training sessions he conducted titled "*How the Media Combats Cybercrime*."

This manipulation naturally creates a state of alarm and incites violent reactions toward sub-Saharan migrants, generating fear and anxiety. As a result, numerous social media pages have emerged, threatening anyone who offers them help or employs them, labeling such individuals as traitors¹⁴.

On September 13, Fatma Mseddi, a parliamentarian and supporter of the president, commented on the recent demonstrations in Tunisia organized by the Tunisian Network for Rights and Freedoms. In her statement, she criticized the protesters who raised slogans against the president, remarking:

¹² Tabbabi, Khaled (2024). "سياسات الهجرة في تونس من 2019 إلى 2024: الوقائع تُكذِّب خطاب السيادة" (Migration Policies in Tunisia from 2019 to 2024: The Facts Contradict the Sovereignty Discourse) This article, authored by sociologist and civil society activist Khaled Al-Tabbabi, provides an analysis of Tunisia's migration policy since President Kais Saied assumed power. Using data, the article refutes Saied's claims centered around sovereignty and his assertion that Tunisia will not become a reservoir for migrants. It demonstrates that, since Saied took office, there has been an increase in the number of migrants intercepted by the coast guard, alongside a policy of tightening immigration controls. The findings suggest that Saied is closely aligned with European migration policies, seemingly in line with his expectations of cooperating with Europe on migration issues in exchange for European tolerance of his authoritarian practices : <https://legal-agenda.com/الهجرة-90%D9%سياسات-اله-2024-إلى-2019-في-تونس-من-الوقائع/>

¹³ During his visit to Jbeniana on July 13, 2023, the president stated that Tunisians are not responsible for the migrants, arguing that they have already provided the necessary aid and are not obligated to do more. He framed the issue as a colonial problem, suggesting that Tunisians themselves are victims of it. The president also emphasized that it is unacceptable for citizens to be subjected to assaults and insisted that the state should find a solution. This discourse reveals numerous contradictions, accusations, and attempts to evade responsibility : <https://www.facebook.com/share/v/KayTcZULaVBqkc8h/?mibextid=jmPrMh>

¹⁴ As we can see in this video, Saadia Msabih, who was advocating for the rights of migrants and rejecting racism, is being defamed. She, along with anyone who follows her approach, is being labeled a criminal and a terrorist, and is accused of high treason, with the harshest punishment being called for execution. <https://www.facebook.com/61570391990168/videos/1014434873986116/?idortvanity=946510320502770>

"They did not call for the deportation of Africans but rather accused the president of racism. You can understand."

Mseddi emphasized that the protesters' slogans focused on labeling the president as racist rather than explicitly demanding the deportation of African migrants, implying that their actions might be driven by a hidden agenda.

Following these demonstrations, several Facebook pages began circulating messages discouraging assistance to migrants, arguing that providing help would encourage them to stay. While it is difficult to measure the exact influence of these messages on public opinion, the significant engagement with such narratives suggests that they contribute to shaping public discourse.

This situation has undoubtedly created confusion among those who genuinely believe that these migrants deserve help, even from a purely humanitarian perspective. It has made people feel cautious and fearful of being targeted or publicly shamed. During my visits to Jbeniana, I observed that some people would deliberately leave food on their tables for children who were begging. A waiter who approached me to ask if I needed anything confirmed this. When I asked if he could provide something to eat for the children, offering to pay for it, he replied:

*"Poor souls, people feel sympathy for them. As you can see, they are young and have nothing; they should be in school. Sometimes, I feel pity for them and buy them food with my own money, even though I'm just a worker here. Sometimes others buy them food, and sometimes people share their meals with them, but for how long? Their overwhelming numbers make it impossible to meet all their needs."*¹⁵

On one occasion¹⁶, I was in a public space when I noticed a young man moving to another table, leaving some food behind for the children, and sitting alone at a different spot. I could not interpret his reaction at the time or understand why he didn't stay at the same table with them. However, based on what I've seen on social media and how those who support migrants are portrayed, it seemed he was driven by a fear of being stigmatized as a traitor.

In another discussion, a taxi driver described the situation *"as abnormal and somewhat crazy"*.¹⁷ He noted that some taxi drivers face severe penalties simply for engaging with migrants. He explained that if caught transporting migrants, the penalty could be at least a month in prison, and if the arrangement was made over the phone, the punishment would be even more severe. He

¹⁵ Ethnographic observations and informal conversations conducted in public spaces in Jbeniana on June 7, 2024, around 1:00 p.m.

¹⁶ Ethnographic observation conducted in public space in Jbeniana on June 7, 2024.

¹⁷ An informal interview conducted with a taxi driver in Sfax on June 10, 2024.

mentioned that many of his colleagues are currently detained at the *Gorjani* (detention center in Tunis), as if they had committed a crime. He emphasized that, as a taxi driver, he should not be expected to investigate the backgrounds of his passengers—whether they are Black or White, with papers or without. The driver pointed out that there is no documented legal order prohibiting him from transporting passengers. He argued that blaming migrants for violence is illogical, especially when they are deprived of their rights and when citizens are forbidden from providing them with food, transportation, or housing. In his view, it is understandable that they might resort to violence under such circumstances.

He expressed frustration, stating that as a taxi driver, he is expected to pick up anyone who hails him, regardless of their background or legal status. He recounted a recent incident where a woman from sub-Saharan Africa flagged him down, pleading for a ride to the hospital, initially offering 3 dinars. Despite her increasing the offer to 10, then 15 dinars, he refused out of fear of arrest. He concluded by lamenting the challenges of living in what he described as a "*failed state*."

This tension between residents and migrants highlights the risks of expressing solidarity, particularly regarding material support. While initial humanitarian aid was motivated by empathy, the increasing economic pressures have made such solidarity more difficult to sustain. In this context, material solidarity has become strained as locals feel that their own struggles are being overshadowed by the overwhelming number of migrants, with insufficient state or international support to address the situation. The lack of systemic solutions—from both the government and formal aid channels—further exacerbates the issue, leaving citizens feeling abandoned and unable to cope with the growing demands for support.

This shift from empathy to frustration underscores the limits of solidarity when resources are scarce, and the burden of providing aid falls disproportionately on individuals rather than being supported by broader social or governmental structures. It raises important questions about the sustainability of solidarity amidst escalating economic and social challenges and emphasizes the need for more comprehensive strategies to address both the needs of migrants and the concerns of local populations. In the absence of official frameworks and programs capable of addressing citizens' needs, there is a systematic pushing of vulnerable groups into conflict, which is not isolated from the ongoing conflicts against migrants occurring worldwide.

As Vincent Geisser (2023) pointed out, "leaders like Saïed and those with whom he is compared tend to focus on identity politics, using 'the Other' as a scapegoat to distract from deeper systemic problems such as economic inequality, social stagnation, or political inefficacy. By framing immigrants, racial minorities, or other marginalized groups as threats, these leaders deflect attention from the lack of substantive policies addressing economic or social challenges".

In this light, it suggests that Saïed, rather than proposing innovative economic or social reforms, may be following a broader global trend of populist leaders who resort to divisive rhetoric as a substitute for meaningful governance.

Victimisation of women, and strategies of resilience:

Although our primary objective was to study the phenomenon of sub-Saharan Africans' presence in Tunisia from the perspective of Tunisians, particularly local populations, we could not overlook the notable presence of sub-Saharan migrants and locals on social media, especially women. I felt it was essential to highlight the stories I have experienced and witnessed with these women, particularly in a social climate rife with stigma. These investigations may also pave the way for further exploration and in-depth research in future studies.

In conversation with Z, (mentioned before). She pointed out *"Many cases of AIDS have been recorded. Who told you that a white person does not sleep with a black person? My relative works in the hospital as a nurse. She told me that an African woman came to the hospital with four or five men. When asked who the father of the child was, she replied that they were all the fathers. In another case, a woman came in with two men, both claiming to be the father."*

I said, *"At least they acknowledge their children."*

She responded, *"Because it is normal in their culture. They live like animals, having sex without any control, and sometimes they do not even know who the father is. They want to have children to obtain residency in Tunisia."*

On another occasion, while waiting for louage from Sfax on July 07, I was sitting next to an elderly man. Unlike previous times when I would start the conversation, this time he initiated it, talking about many topics, including his situation and the situation of youth in Tunisia who do not work anymore and the sub-Saharan who are doing their work. Among other things, he said that he could not understand the mindset of African women. He wondered how they manage, often accompanied by two or three children and pregnant with another.

"How do they live?" he asked. "How do they feed these children, especially since a child needs care, diapers, food, and other necessities?" He went on, saying, "Some say they want to have children here to obtain Tunisian citizenship."

These perceptions reflect the stereotypical image of sub-Saharan migrant women as lacking value, being a source of sexually transmitted diseases, and posing a threat to the social fabric, an issue that must be addressed.

This also aligns with a recent report by (Matri and Morales,2024), which we also discussed in the podcast with Khawla Al-Matari. The report highlights how Tunisian men exert control over sub-Saharan migrants, particularly through the moral policing of their behavior in public spaces. This control is often framed as an effort to preserve masculine honor, while the sexual abuse of migrant women is frequently overlooked or tolerated. Meanwhile, Black male migrants are stripped of their

masculinity and subjected to domination. This situation is driven by cultural conservatism, internalized racism, and media narratives that depict sub-Saharan migrants as a threat. Additionally, rumors about disease transmission contribute to the stigma these migrants face.”

Many studies and investigations as well show that female migrants often face stigma and assault during their journey, particularly sexual assault. Clarice, a woman in her 50s and a mother of two children, whom she left with her sister in her country of origin, is one of the thousands of women who endure this. I first met her in February 2024, and we have stayed in touch since then.

From Cameroon to Algeria through the desert, some died on the way due to thirst, as she says. From Algeria to Nigeria, where Algerian authorities deported them, and from Nigeria, they were deported again to Algeria and then to Libya after some convinced them that the journey to Europe from the Libyan coast would be easier. She could not imagine for a moment that what awaited her might be worse than hell. As she mentioned, treated like slaves, raped, and subjected to violations, practices that we thought had passed decades ago. She was stopped by militia at gunpoint, along with her sister, and placed in a house where she was raped for three days until she started bleeding. She kept begging them to let her go, and they kept her sister, whom she knew nothing about until now. Clarisse managed to escape again but did not go far before being arrested again and placed in prison again with many women and children, hungry and sick without mercy.

“No one listens to us when we moan or complain. They beat and humiliate us and give us painkillers to sleep. They force us to stay in these prisons and demand at least 700 dinars to release us, and for each child, 150 dinars,”

She continues: *It is hard to be a woman there. They choose young women, with a good breast, to either be sold or raped”.*

Undoubtedly, the trauma she experienced there still affects her deeply. Ultimately, she managed to escape and reach Tunisia with other women by devising an ingenious plan that no one would have thought of. As she told me, they urinated on the prison wall until it became weak and easy to break. They then made a hole in the wall and escaped.

Although many women who face violence during their journey share Clarice’s experience, it did not stop her from continuing with resilience and determination.

Many women like her remain hopeful and determined to navigate these challenges, some of them, paradoxically using their sexuality—once weaponized against them—as a means of survival.

As I browsed through numerous social media pages related to migration issues, I frequently came across posts and pages managed by both Tunisians and Africans, sharing photos and videos. I repeatedly encountered the word *bizi* and noticed that entire pages were titled *Bizi for Boza*. Although I had become familiar with the term *boza* through discussions with researchers involved in the SolRoute project—referring to irregular migration, similar to the word *harga* used in North

Africa—the meaning of *bizi* was unclear to me, as it is not a Tunisian term. However, the content of these pages suggested that it was related to sex. Women appeared in photos or posts with their contact numbers, offering sexual services. Initially, I thought *bizi* simply referred to sex.

However, after exchanging information with some people, I learned that the original meaning of *bizi* is connected to the word *business*. These raised questions: how did the concept of business, originally linked to economic activities, become associated with providing sexual services? When and how did sex become an economic activity tied to migration?

This issue warrants further investigation. However, our lack of knowledge on the matter, combined with our unfamiliarity with local African dialects, prevents us from offering in-depth anthropological explanations. For now, what concerns us most is examining the content of these pages and understanding how this phenomenon has developed. For instance, the women who shared their phone numbers on these platforms, with whom I had the opportunity to speak, confirmed that they engaged in this practice to secure their journey to Europe. With opportunities blocked and jobs scarce in Tunisia, sexuality becomes one of the few means of survival and a way to ensure passage amid a migration policy that stifles individuals and deprives them of opportunities.

As pointed out by (Levy and Liber 2013), in migration contexts marked by extreme precarity, Northern Chinese women in Paris often turn to sexuality as an alternative resource. They use various economic-sexual arrangements to cope with their precarious conditions and lack of residence permits. With limited access to labour markets, these women see “finding someone” as a critical means to address their economic and legal challenges, engaging in economic-sexual transactions comparable to street prostitution.

Similarly, Arab and Moujoud (2018) explore the experiences of Moroccan women in Dubai, highlighting how these women navigate various professional sectors and achieve both social and migratory mobility despite significant challenges. They confront the restrictive boundaries imposed by wealthy countries—particularly in the Gulf—on disadvantaged populations from the Global South. While navigating migratory spaces and labor markets, these women manage to attain a certain level of mobility, though they are rarely acknowledged as legitimate foreign workers. Their stigmatization stems from transgressing social boundaries related to gender, class, and nationality, which simultaneously exposes them to mechanisms of control and opens spaces for resistance. Through complex strategies, they mobilize meanings associated with gender, sexuality, and national identity while remaining focused on their migration goals.

These stories, along with comparative cases from diverse geographical contexts, reveal how restrictive migration regimes—whether in the Gulf, Europe, or elsewhere—produce similar conditions of vulnerability and elicit parallel forms of strategic navigation among migrant women.

Such patterns transcend national borders, illustrating how global systems of migration governance shape deeply personal and intimate experiences.

These narratives also challenge the simplistic view of women as mere victims. Instead, they invite us to confront the complex and nuanced realities migrant women face and to critically interrogate a migratory system that claims to combat human trafficking while simultaneously closing off all legal pathways for those seeking a better life. It is this very system—by eliminating safe and legal options—that pushes migrants into precarious and often exploitative conditions.

Speaking Against the Grain: Generative narrative workshop and the importance of public sociology in engaging with socio-political issues:

In the current socio-political climate, both in Tunisia and the broader region, public engagement through mediums such as podcasts has become increasingly crucial. These platforms offer an opportunity to address and challenge the pervasive issues of racism, fascism, and the suppression of human and women's rights that are gaining prominence. Engaging in public sociology through such initiatives is not merely about academic discourse but about actively shaping and informing public opinion and societal attitudes.

The podcast addresses internal societal issues and the role that our politicians play, which are often overshadowed by external factors such as colonialism. By focusing on racism, xenophobia, and other forms of discrimination within our communities, the podcast encourages self-reflection and a sense of active responsibility. It emphasizes the importance of acknowledging and addressing these issues to foster meaningful change.

Additionally, the rise of fascism and conservative movements is a growing concern, particularly as they impact the rights of minorities in our society, such as black people and migrants. This podcast aims to confront these ideologies directly, challenging the normalization of oppressive views and practices. By discussing these issues openly, the podcast contributes to a broader understanding and resistance against such dangerous trends.

Engaging in public sociology through this podcast ,It acts as a call to action for individuals to actively participate in shaping a society where diversity is celebrated, and everyone's rights are protected.

In conclusion, we believe that this podcast serves as a platform for critical discourse, encouraging individuals to confront internal issues, challenge oppressive ideologies, and actively participate in building a more inclusive and just society.

Challenges and Difficulties:

The working arrangements initially involved an agreement with the director of a local radio station in Mahdia to collaborate on this project. At first, he showed a great deal of cooperation. I discussed the idea with the radio station owner, including the potential risks of addressing such sensitive topics in a politically charged climate. He appeared very cooperative and understanding and seemed somewhat aware of the challenges related to freedom of expression, which is increasingly under threat in Tunisia.

However, after a while, the situation took an unexpected turn. It became clear that certain aspects of our agreement were not fully understood or communicated effectively. The journalist he put me in contact with initially showed enthusiasm and even began working on the project, but two days later, she informed me that she could no longer continue and ceased responding to my messages. When I reached out to the radio station director for clarification, he cited the current political climate as being too risky to proceed and stated that he needed additional funds to move forward.

Although we had initially discussed these challenges, it seemed that circumstances had shifted, leading to a change in his willingness to support the project. I later attempted to clarify the situation with the journalist, explaining the intentions behind our collaboration and emphasizing that the agreed-upon amount was fair and worthwhile for her. It became evident, however, that she was not aware of the agreed-upon amount. Moreover, she felt unable to confront her manager or disobey his instructions—after all, she works for him. She expressed discomfort and felt unable to continue, given her position within the radio station.

This situation once again brings us face to face with the financial aspect of conducting research and its impact on the level of engagement and commitment of participants. It raises important questions about whether their involvement is driven by genuine ethical and humanitarian concerns or is purely motivated by economic factors. If the motivation is primarily economic, to what extent can this influence the integrity and value of the research?

In the context of academic and field research, the financial component plays a crucial role in shaping the dynamics of participant engagement. While monetary compensation can serve as a necessary incentive, especially in cases where individuals are taking personal risks or contributing their time and expertise, it also risks commodifying the research process. When participants are driven solely by financial gain, it can raise ethical concerns regarding the validity and integrity of the research.

Nonetheless, the politically charged and hazardous climate may discourage individuals from sustaining their involvement in the project, which is understandable, especially in light of the numerous legal actions and pressures directed at activists working in the field of migration.

In light of this situation, we were forced to reorganize and coordinate with other activists in civil society. In addition, due to the time constraints, we had to complete the work quickly, which affected the technical conditions that were not as we had expected.

As a result, some guests, like Sofiane, were uncomfortable and stressed, which affected the recording, making some words unclear. Others, like Khaoula, were speaking while hitting the table with her hand and moving a lot, which was also evident in the recording. Meanwhile, Khaled was speaking quickly, which affected the recording, and some words seemed unclear. Additionally, our lack of experience in managing media and auditory interviews led to us overlooking these mistakes, which only became apparent later after the recording. Of course, it was difficult to redo the recordings, especially since we could not access the participants when we needed them.

However, we tried to overcome these issues in the fifth recording with Safouane. Given his experience in handling such issues, which led to a clearer recording. The speech flowed more naturally, and the guest appeared more comfortable.

Insight on the podcast idea and discussed points

The generative narrative workshop centers around a podcast divided into five main themes, featuring between five participants, including young researchers, academics, and civil society activists.

The podcast explored themes such as the phenomenon of sub-Saharan African migration to Tunisia and its relation to externalization. We seek to determine whether this truly represents a new migration dynamic, where Tunisia has shifted from being a country of origin and transit into a temporary or even permanent destination for migrants.

Another key theme focuses on understanding the reaction of Tunisians toward sub-Saharan migrants. This includes interpreting the rejection expressed by many Tunisians, especially through social media, who call for the deportation of African migrants. We aim to question whether this response is rooted in racism or is a reaction to the country's strained economic situation.

We also delve into the discourse on racism to assess whether it has been sufficiently analyzed, particularly at the academic level, and whether there are gaps in how this topic is addressed. Additionally, the podcast will examine the president's discourse on African migration and what implications it has for public perception and policy. This includes understanding how his discourse aligns with broader issues of identity and the economic crisis, as well as examining the apparent contradictions.

Finally, the role of intellectuals and civil society in the current context was explored, especially in light of the rise in violence and the criminalization of solidarity with migrants.

The first episode was conducted with Sofiane Jballah , an assistant professor at the University of Sfax and a civil society actor. He highlighted how the Tunisian regime benefits from the externalization of borders. He noted that while external border policies are often seen as European-imposed restrictions, Tunisia itself actively participates and gains from enforcing these borders. This approach not only aligns with European interests but also grants the regime domestic legitimacy, especially in a context where it faces diminishing political and democratic credibility.

He conveyed a view that shifts responsibility for tensions between Tunisians and Sub-Saharan migrants away from the general public and toward the political regime. He argued that the regime's policies, particularly regarding the externalization of borders, shape these tensions and that Tunisians' actions shouldn't be generalized as racist. This perspective implies that the state's stance and decisions around migration have influenced public perceptions, making it more a matter of state-led framing than societal prejudice.

The second episode was conducted with Khaled Tababi, who holds a PhD in Sociology, with a focus on protest movements and the transformations of trade union activism after 2011. He is particularly interested in migration issues and was one of the first researchers in Tunisia to link migration to protest movements through his master's thesis. Khaled is also a civil society activist, beginning his involvement with the student movement and later engaging in political activism with a Marxist political party. He is currently a member of the Scientific Committee of the Tunisian Forum for Economic and Social Rights, combining his role as a researcher with active engagement in social issues. We discussed the Tunisian border management and considering that we have gone beyond just being a border guard to what he considers "geographic rental," meaning that Tunisia has transformed from a border guard—at least in the political stance—but this can also apply to analytical frameworks. We have shifted from being a border guard to becoming a true jailer or a trap for migrants in general.

He also emphasized the division within civil society in Tunisia. He noted that it comprises two main parts: one is made up of agencies and organizations funded by the European Union, which operate in alignment with EU policies; the other consists of a progressive and democratic civil society that, despite its limitations, plays significant political and social roles. This latter group primarily engages in protests, political discourse, and solidarity actions for migrants who are stranded in Tunisia or detained within the Schengen area.

The third episode was conducted with Khaoula el Matri, a socio-anthropologist, professor, and researcher at the University of Sousse. She is also the scientific lead of the Madar project in collaboration with IRMC, which explores issues of marginalization, forms of violence, and racism against sub-Saharan migrants. We discussed her recently published report on this topic, co-authored with Edgar Cortova, an anthropologist from Mexico. The report is titled "From Crisis to Normalization: Violence, Marginalization, and Forms of Resistance".

We discussed the results of the research she conducted, focusing on what she considered a break or shift in Tunisia's border management before and after President Kais Saied's famous speech in February 2023 regarding migrants from Sub-Saharan Africa. This speech affected the presence of these migrants, who became threatened even in the most basic aspects of life, with their dignity violated and the most fundamental needs for survival unmet. She argued that the political issue surrounding migration policies between Tunisia and the European Union, especially Italy, has shifted into a social issue. Tunisians have become hostile toward migrants due to this official state discourse that portrays them as a threat, settlers, and more. This has even affected solidarity, as Tunisians who were once supportive for humanitarian reasons have become afraid to express such solidarity.

In the four episodes, we continued with Ms khaoula el Matri, and we focused on the role of civil society and so-called humanitarian organizations, which, according to Ms. Khaoula, have paradoxically contributed to creating a form of classificatory vulnerability. She argues that these organizations, in one way or another, have become complicit in exporting borders and selective in their criteria for choosing asylum seekers. In her view, they no longer fulfill their intended role and have, to some extent, become complicit with the European Union's border export policies, as they also rely on its financial support, among other factors.

The fifth episode was dedicated to the opinions of some citizens who shared their views on the presence of sub-Saharan Africans in Tunisia. Sociologist Soufiane Trabelsi joined us to provide commentary and analysis. Whose research has focused particularly on the configuration and reconfiguration of solidarity connections. He also offered his perspective on the issue of solidarity within the context of migration. We also discussed the role of researchers today and the reductionist tendency in analysis that focuses solely on a single factor while neglecting the complexities of reality, particularly regarding the tendency to reduce Tunisians' reactions to racism.

Conclusion :

The presence of sub-Saharan migrants in Tunisia, particularly in Sfax and Jbeniana, reveals a complex interplay of solidarity, hostility, and resilience. This report highlights the diverse and often contradictory ways in which local communities perceive and interact with migrants. On one hand, there are notable examples of solidarity, grounded in shared humanity and a sense of moral obligation. From individuals providing food to those in need to local actors advocating for structural solutions, these acts demonstrate that empathy and support persist, even in difficult circumstances.

However, Frustration over rising costs, and a sense of abandonment by the state have led to mounting resentment as economic pressures intensify in Tunisia and the number of migrants increases, particularly from the perspectives of local communities, hostility grows.. While these tensions are clearly visible within the local context, they are not isolated from broader

transnational dynamics. The political discourses and media narratives framing migrants as threats to national identity and sovereignty are not unique to Tunisia; they are part of a wider global trend shaped by transnational power structures. This rhetoric, which circulates in many countries, not only legitimizes discriminatory practices but also shifts public perception, often undermining initial acts of solidarity. In this way, the frustration against migrants in Tunisia must be understood as part of a larger, interconnected global discourse that influences local attitudes and actions.

In this context, resilience emerges as a defining trait of migrant communities. Faced with structural racism, economic exploitation, and social marginalization, many migrants—especially women—have displayed a sense of strength. By navigating adversity with creativity and determination, turning even stigmatized aspects of their identity into tools for survival. Their stories challenge us to move beyond simplistic narratives of victimhood and instead recognize the agency and resistance embodied in their daily lives.

Recognizing the need for broader societal engagement, this report also underscores the role of public sociology in fostering dialogue and promoting change. The podcast initiative explored in this report serves as a vital platform for addressing migration, racism, and solidarity in a format that bridges academic research with public discourse. By engaging researchers, civil society actors, and everyday citizens, the podcast challenges exclusionary narratives, and encourages reflection on shared responsibilities. It exemplifies how researchers can move beyond academic confines to actively contribute to societal change, using accessible and participatory tools to foster empathy, understanding, and action.

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